

Public takes aim at police request for extra funding; Toronto residents criticize lack of similar resources for other needs like housing, climate action

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Body

City council should stop making police the main priority in this year's budget, according to the members of the public who attended this week's virtual consultations.

Many who made submissions over two days of public sessions into Toronto's 2022 budget cited their disgust over last year's violent clearing of homeless encampments, the persistent lack of affordable housing and the continuing harassment and deaths of fellow residents involving police.

"When I look at the budget, I do not see a commitment to funding people," resident Blythe Haynes said in her speech to the budget committee on Monday.

"I see a commitment to protecting the status quo, which criminalizes poverty, harms Black, Indigenous and racialized communities and works to benefit a small subset of the population."

With Toronto police requesting an additional \$25 million for its \$1-billion budget - already approved by Mayor John Tory and the police board but not yet finalized by city council - dozens of people who signed up to speak Monday and Tuesday honed in on that spending, lamenting the lack of similar resources for affordable housing, transit, climate action, as well as arts and culture programs.

The request for more money for police comes after a year that saw protests over police and city workers clearing people living in public parks as the city struggled to manage overcrowded shelters and the threat of COVID-19. Clearing three large encampments, including Trinity Bellwoods Park, cost the city nearly \$2 million.

Residents at the public budget meetings were also still reeling from the death of Regis Korchinski-Paquet in May, who fell 24 storeys after seven police officers responded to a call for a familial dispute.

Nicole Anasis shared a recent story about a friend, who Anasis described as a "strong, intelligent and very kind Black woman," needing a ride to get help during a mental-health crisis.

"She called me because she didn't feel comfortable calling emergency services," Anasis said.

Ontario's police watchdog cleared officers of any wrongdoing in the death of Korchinski-Paquet, but "police responded to a mental-health crisis and a life was lost," Anasis told councillors. "My friend sees herself in Regis."

The city has budgeted about \$12 million for new community-led services, including a pilot project that would see civilian crisis workers, not police, respond to such calls, but Anasis said the funding for that program could be more ambitious and devoted to basic needs like housing.

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The people who spoke at the budget meeting this week related the need for housing to the spending on police. "It is unacceptable not only that shelters and respite centres are full, but people living in encampments are violently disbanded when they have literally nowhere else to go," Haynes said.

Speaker Vanessa Conley pointed to the level of spending on Toronto police compared with other city services.

"Policing receives more money than public libraries, shelter and housing services, social services, and employment and community housing combined," Conley said.

The police budget is also larger than the budget for Toronto Fire and Toronto Paramedic Services combined, Conley noted.

Donovan Hayden shared what it was like growing up Black, the differing perceptions of police officers, even within his own family, and his own negative experiences.

"We have been criticized for not understanding the situation by folks like Toronto's mayor," Hayden said. "Do I understand the bureaucracy of city council? No. Do I understand the complexity of how a budget is approved? Not quite, but I'm trying to learn.

"What I do understand is people in my community getting hurt or arrested during a wellness check. What I understand is seeing young black children having guns pulled on them by cops for playing," said Hayden. "If all those incidents are due to bad apples, we need a different tree."

The budget process continues. Council will have a final say on Feb. 17.

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